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MICHAEL DAVITT

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MICHAEL DAVITT[1]

Posterity frames its own verdict on the achievements of political leaders, and it is idle for contemporaries, whose vision is naturally restricted to a particular angle, to anticipate, much less to dictate, what that verdict ought to be. Yet whatever may be added to or taken from the fame of Michael Davitt, it is difficult to believe that he will not remain to future generations, as he was to his own, the man whose hammer-strokes destroyed a system of land tenure, which for over three centuries had been the most powerful instrument in compassing the economic degradation of the Irish people, and ensuring their subjection to alien rule.

Davitt, who was modesty itself where his own claims were concerned, would have been the first to admit the magnitude of the debt he owed to predecessors whose efforts failed to obtain the same measure of success. On its practical side The New Departure, as his policy was termed, was by no means so new as some of his admirers in the eighties imagined. Its underlying principle was that instinctively adopted by masses of the Irish tenantry when threatened with expulsion from their holdings. The difference was that what had been at the best a sectional effort on separate estates took shape in Davitt's scheme as a concentration of national force to strengthen the hands of the weak and the oppressed. In a phrase which has become the rallying cry of organised Labour, "an injury to one was an injury to all"; and the poorest cottier found the mass of his countrymen at his back in the struggle to keep "a firm grip on his homestead."

On its philosophic side the policy had been enunciated thirty years earlier by Fintan Lalor, "the wonderful little hunchback," as Davitt calls him in *The Fall of Feudalism*, but Davitt in his lonely broodings in Dartmoor Prison arrived at Lalor's conclusions in complete ignorance of Lalor's writings, which, to the shame of a whole generation of Irishmen had been left buried and unread in the files of *The Nation* and *The Irish Felon*.

[1] This Lecture has been presented by the Author to the Society

It was fitting that the axe should be laid to the root of the tree of landlordism by a man who belonged by blood and birth to that section of the Irish people upon whom the evils of an intolerable system had imposed the heaviest burden. Davitt was born at Straide in Mayo under the dark shadow of the Great Famine, and was one of the innumerable victims of the great clearances. As a child of six he saw his father's cabin levelled to the ground by the Crowbar Brigade in pursuance of the policy which sought, in the words of a British Viceroy, " to make Ireland the fruitful mother of flocks and herds," by the process, as John Bright put it, of " making Irishmen the sole Irish export." Davitt and his family were among the exports of those grim years, and from the lonely fields of Mayo were flung like flotsam into the reeking slums where Lancashire housed her industrial workers.

Here Davitt was caught in the toils of a system no less ruthless and tyrannical than that from which he had fled. The poverty of his family had forced him as a child into a cotton mill, and in his endeavour to tend a machine beyond his strength his right arm was caught in the wheel, and so terribly mangled that amputation was necessary. As Sheehy-Skeffington says in his brilliant biography : " The absence of his right arm was the symbol of his maimed life, of his manhood inured in dungeons, of his youthful strength pitilessly marred in the unequal contest with the powers of England. If that pitiful maiming was not sustained at the hands of the alien government of Davitt's native land it was an indelible mark of his struggle with even a grimmer foe, and it had been endured at the hands of that monstrous spirit of greed of which British Imperialism is only one of the uglier manifestations."

The call to political action did not find Davitt wanting. At nineteen he joined the Fenians, and his gift of leadership had so strongly impressed his superiors that in spite of his missing arm he was given the command of a detachment in the force detailed to capture Chester Castle in 1867. The plan of seizing the Castle with its stores of arms fell through at the last moment owing to the treachery of an informer, but Davitt's skill in getting his little band safely out of the trap which had been laid for them was a still further proof

of his ingenuity and resourcefulness in a crisis. After the breakdown of the rising in Ireland and the imprisonment or exile of its leaders not a few of those who had been most ardent in the struggle had lost heart. Davitt, on the contrary, set himself to repair what had been lost, and to make preparations for renewing the fight under conditions that would give greater hopes of success. Appointed Organising Secretary of the Fenian Body for England and Scotland in 1868, he adopted the guise of a commercial traveller in firearms, and toured the country organising, or rather re-organising, Fenian circles, and procuring rifles, which were despatched by various underground routes to Ireland and to Fenian centres in Great Britain. Though the net of the British Secret Service was closely spread Davitt managed to evade it for two years, but finally he was run down at a London railway station, and sentenced to fifteen years penal servitude for treason felony.

Davitt's prison experiences should be read in his own moving words. England at that time raged against the atrocities of King Bomba, but if the mortality in Neapolitan prisons was higher than in Dartmoor, British officialdom had nothing to learn in the art of breaking political prisoners by what only can be described as scientific and systematic torture. Not content with degrading men charged with political offences to the level of common criminals, the policy was adopted of intensifying for them the rigours of penal servitude. For months Davitt was confined in a cell seven feet long, four feet wide, and little more than seven feet high. The light was so bad that it was impossible to read, and the air so foul that in hot weather he had to lie with his mouth at the bottom of the door to avoid suffocation. In summer time his task was the pounding of putrefying bones into dust to serve as manure ; in winter with seven other convicts he was harnessed like a beast of burden to a cart to drag loads of stone and coal through endless days of sleet and rain, with no means of drying his sodden clothes when his spells of labour were finished.

From the effects of the seven years of long-drawn-out torture Davitt's health never recovered, but if the treatment was intended to break his spirit, as there is reason to believe, it failed signally. It did not even embitter him as it might

easily have a smaller man. During his long musings in his cell Davitt was evolving, not barren hymns of hate against his persecutors, but a scheme of national policy which, as he rightly said in his speech before the Parnell Commission, " represented the triumph of what was forgiving over what was revengeful in my Celtic temperament."

In any estimate of Davitt's plan it is essential to remember the special circumstances and conditions of the period. Even before Davitt found himself in a convict cell the vitality of Fenianism had begun to decline, and from that time onwards its decay was swift. It still retained the allegiance of the best and most active brains in Ireland, but the mass of the people, though their sympathies were with the movement, failed in practice to give it that backing which was required to ensure success.

Davitt held that the main reason for the decay of Fenianism was that it was a secret organisation. Secrecy, indeed, is imperative if revolutionary plans are to be successfully developed against a *de facto* government which commands powerful resources, and has no intention of permitting itself to be fettered by legal restrictions in dealing with opponents. But in Davitt's view, the secrecy of the Fenians began at the wrong end. As he put it in his *Fall of Feudalism*: " The plan had been to recruit members anyhow and anywhere, and then with the boast of a ' very strong ' body numerically, to think of obtaining weapons to arm the members. Better to make the accumulation of arms a prior consideration to the swearing-in of men under conditions which scarcely suggested a commonsense protection against unsteady or disreputable elements, out of which danger or the hope of reward would easily enlist the treachery of an unfaithful member."

In the New Departure, as originally drafted by its author, there was to be a small secret body which would devote itself wholly to the task of purchasing and storing arms. Meanwhile the country was to be rallied to a great open agitation for the redress of tenants' grievances and the abolition of landlordism. After the land movement had gathered strength Davitt's idea was that a formal demand should be made for the repeal of the Union. Should the demand be rejected, as he expected, the Irish members

were to leave Westminster in a body, and, returning to Dublin, straightway summon a National Convention which would act as an informal legislative assembly while the secret organisation armed the country in its defence.

As will be seen, this plan anticipated in a remarkable fashion some of the developments of Irish politics during the last few years. But the scheme which became practical politics at the end of the seventies bore little resemblance to the policy evolved by Davitt in Dartmoor. It is of the first importance to understand why the process of whittling down was permitted to take place.

Parnell and Davitt were not, as it is sometimes assumed nowadays, wanting in resolution, or unduly timorous of expedients that brought them into conflict with the British Government. But like all political leaders they had to reckon with the special conditions of their time, and with the effects of these conditions on the minds of the masses whose support and cooperation supplied the driving force necessary to make the movement formidable.

Davitt made the land question the central issue in his campaign for various reasons, all of them strong, some of them in the circumstances that prevailed in the late seventies, wholly unanswerable. In the first place, he held with Fintan Lalor that land agitation was a locomotive which, once sufficiently stoked, would generate sufficient power, not only to drive itself, but to carry the national cause along with it. Secondly, he urged that landlord tyranny was so intolerable and pressed so harshly on the majority of the people, that it was impossible for a political party to ignore it. Thirdly, he argued that even were it expressly decided for political reasons not to fight on the land tenants could not be restrained from fighting on it on their own account, with a consequent dissipation of energy which must of necessity react injuriously on the national cause.

Davitt's scheme succeeded in making for unity of effort, but with qualifications that, though they appeared of minor significance to contemporaries, are now seen to cut at the roots of the successful development of the plan in accordance with its author's intentions.

A large portion of the best elements in the Fenian ranks

flung themselves wholeheartedly into the campaign, and in the struggle that followed constituted the shock-troops of the Land League forces. It was their adhesion that gave the movement virility, and served in every crisis to intensify and stiffen the backs of less resolute colleagues.

The Fenian leaders, however, held firmly to their belief that the land crusade was not an effective lever to secure the triumph of their ideals. In Davitt's opinion their opposition made it impracticable to carry out that portion of his plan which aimed at establishing a small secret organisation whose business it would be to provide the arms necessary for effective revolutionary action if the open movement failed. The result of this decision was to limit the Land League in practice, if not in theory, to what in a popular, though, as it proved, meaningless phrase, was described as "agitation within the Constitution." The fallacy lay in the assumption that a Constitution existed within which agitation was possible. When agitation promised to succeed in its aims, the supposed guardians of the Constitution declined to be bound by the restrictions which they imposed on their opponents, and demonstrated to the world that English law in Ireland was designed only to serve as fetters for Irishmen. This, however, was in the future; in the early days of the New Departure the limitations that circumscribed its operations were not so plainly apparent.

The Land League was born in a fortunate hour. Throughout the seventies agricultural prices, already deplorably low in Ireland, were sagging steadily as a result of the flooding of the European market with American, Canadian and Australian produce, grown on virgin soil by cultivators who were not bled white by the exactions of rapacious landlords. To complicate the situation, the year 1876 ushered in a series of bad harvests which, especially in the West of Ireland, where the majority of tenants lived at the best of times below the poverty line, made starvation a spectre that haunted every cabin.

In England abatements of rent were granted to farmers as a matter of course; in Ireland landlords seized the opportunity to clear estates, and eviction notices fell like snowflakes. There was no mistaking the nature of the

challenge, and the League was equally prompt to meet it. Tenants continued to offer what they regarded as a fair rent, and, as was shown later in the Land Courts, this offer, in practically every case, exceeded the just value of the holding. Hitherto force had been a landlord monopoly. Davitt and his colleagues, by concentrating the popular strength behind threatened tenants, showed that this was a game that two could play at. The boycott proved in practice a more humane and also a more effective weapon than the blunderbuss by which evicted tenants in the past had sometimes sought to avenge their wrongs, and its systematic application not merely wore down landlord opposition, but gave a new consciousness of what might be achieved by unity of action to the rank and file of the national forces.

On their side the oligarchy met the challenge with the stereotyped demand that the Government should employ force to the uttermost to safeguard their privileges. As usual, the Government were only too eager to oblige. Gladstone discovered that the movement was not merely directed against the Irish land system and the authority of the British Government, but was, as in English opinion such attacks always are till they are crowned with success, the negation of all morality. It was ostensibly in the interests of morality, and not in the defence of indefensible privilege, that a drastic Coercion Act was introduced. According to Forster, the Quaker Chief Secretary, its purpose was to strike terror into the " handful of broken men and village ruffians " who were, so he asked the world to believe, the real force behind the Land League.

Naturally, the first of the " broken men " to be dealt with was Davitt. An open prosecution failed, but Dublin Castle had other strings to its bow. The ticket-of-leave on which Davitt had been released was suspended, and he was sent to finish the unexpired term of his sentence in Portland. As was obvious to anyone who knew the temper of the Irish people the arrest of Davitt and the imprisonment of ever-increasing numbers of " suspects," far from damping down the agitation, added fuel to the flames. Forster was apparently quite content that this should happen, and like all England's " strong men " in Ireland, his panacea for the

effects produced by coercion was a still stiffer dose of coercion. Gladstone was, however, acute enough to see that an experiment in conciliation promised better results, and as the Land League redoubled its efforts Gladstone's ideas of a settlement expanded as if by magic.

If the Land Act of 1881 did not concede the full claims of the League, it effected what amounted to a revolution by reducing the landlord from an unfettered autocrat to a mere annuitant, and subjecting his rent for the future to periodical revisions by an outside tribunal. In public Parnell declined to vote for the measure, and urged his followers to abstain from taking advantage of its provisions till the worth of the Land Courts had been tested by their decisions in a series of cases selected by the League. Stung to fury by this reception of his gift-horse, Gladstone retorted by imprisoning the Irish Leader and his colleagues, a stroke which in its turn was met by the issue of a No-Rent manifesto. In private, however, Parnell always insisted that the Act could not be rejected, for the reason that the Irish tenant, no matter what his political guides might recommend, would not deprive himself of its benefits.

It was on the basis of recognition of the Act in return for concessions about arrears that Parnell some months later negotiated the Kilmainham Treaty, one of the stipulations of which was the release of Michael Davitt. Though Davitt was free he was by no means in an exultant mood, for the Kilmainham Treaty, concluded behind his back, and without his knowledge, made nonsense of the New Departure as he had planned it. A heavy blow had been dealt at landlordism, but it was no longer possible, as Davitt had hoped, to employ the impetus of that blow for direct revolutionary action.

So far the orthodox Fenians were justified in their conclusion that it was not sound policy to stake everything on the land agitation. It is arguable, however, that it was no mean advantage to have the land problem, if not settled, placed at least in process of settlement, and that apart from the fact that a potential settlement avoided the dissipation of energy in future struggles, it also had the positive and direct result of strengthening the available national resources.

No small portion of constitutionalists as well as Fenians held the view in the eighties that the redress or even the amelioration of land grievances would dull the ardour of Irish Nationalism, and weaken the demand for a full measure of national freedom. As is now obvious, this is a fallacy. Events have shown that a peasantry " rooted like rocks in the soil," to quote Lalor's phrase, is no less determined to assert its right to freedom than the half-starved and rack-rented tenants who rallied to Davitt's call, and is in an infinitely better position to impose its will upon formidable enemies.

The critics of the New Departure were probably right in their view that to make a national battle-cry of economic grievances was to run the risk that the whole or even partial redress of these grievances would deprive the movement of some of its driving force. But there is also the danger that when so glaring a scandal as the unreformed Irish land system exists a scheme to abolish its worst features can be skilfully used to sap the strength of a political party which declines to fight economic evils that poison the life of a majority of its followers.

Possibly bolder handling would have seemed a revolutionary triumph in the early days of the Land League. Davitt himself believed that the No-Rent strike should have been declared six months before Parnell and his colleagues were sent to Kilmainham, though even Davitt did not go so far as to say that such a step would have finally overthrown Castle Rule. Parnell, who was a singularly acute judge of the realities of a political situation, held on the other hand that the Irish people had gone as far as under the circumstances they could be induced to go. His policy was to consolidate the ground that had been gained, and use it as a jumping-off place for a further advance ; and Parnell was strong enough to impose his will. Though Davitt loyally accepted his leader's decision and refrained from making difficulties, he did not abandon his conviction that the Kilmainham compromise was a mistake. His espousal of the land theories of Henry George, which drew some sharp criticisms from Parnell, who not only objected to Land Nationalisation in itself, but held that to raise it would confuse the national issue, widened the cleavage between the two men.

To the end Davitt remained a great force in Irish politics, but after the Land League days it can scarcely be said that his gifts found their fullest and freest expression. Ill-health and the necessity of making a livelihood for his family accounted for this in a measure ; and as Westminster became the cockpit of the battle, Davitt, who held aloof from the Parliamentary struggle, ceased inevitably to occupy the same space in the programme as a number of smaller men. This, however, was to him a matter of no moment. Unlike some of his colleagues he was devoid of any trace of vanity and self-seeking, and though he might remain unconvinced that a given line of policy was the best that it was possible to devise, yet once it was adopted he could be relied to back it with energy and zeal.

The work he undertook to do was admirably done. He played a foremost part in organising the Irish vote in English constituencies with results that startled Liberals and Tories alike. In the Parnell Commission he conducted his own case ; and his speech, afterwards published in book form, not only constituted a justification of his part in the Land League—in Irish eyes no justification was needed—but will always stand as an unanswerable indictment of British rule in Ireland.

It was inevitable that Davitt should be found ranged against Parnell in the days of the Split. But it could not be charged that he, like some of those with whom he was allied, had turned on the Irish leader in obedience to English orders. Davitt had taken his stand on the moral issue long before the question of Gladstonian dictation arose, and though Parnell admitted he was the most formidable of his opponents he never questioned the sincerity of his motives.

It was as a result of the Split that Davitt was induced to enter what he was fond of describing as the " Parliamentary penitentiary." Theoretically, he had no objection to agitation at Westminster, but from the first he saw its dangers ; and as early as 1884 he issued a warning which, had it been taken to heart, might have proved profitable to his colleagues. " I cannot look upon it," he wrote, " in any other light than one of serious risk to the future of the national cause that a seat in the British House of Commons should come to be regarded as the one means by which every Irish

Nationalist of any prominence in the popular movement is expected to do most service for Ireland. I am more firmly convinced than ever that it is only by the intelligent and determined combination of our people outside of Parliament and the concentration of the great moral forces at our command that the full measure of our country's rights can be achieved." As a Parliamentarian Davitt was always a fish out of water ; and his best speech in the House was his final protest when he shook its dust from his feet on the occasion of the declaration of war against the Boer Republics. "I have," he said, "for four years tried to appeal to the sense of justice in the House of Commons on behalf of Ireland. I leave convinced that no just cause, no cause of right, will ever find support from this House of Commons unless it is backed up by force."

Davitt's main object during the last years of his life was to secure the adoption of a constructive programme which should link up the Irish cause more strongly with the general movement in favour of advanced democratic ideals. As far back as 1896 he demanded in his paper, *The Labour World*, a better and more democratic organisation of labour, the diversion from the pocket of the landlord to that of the community of the immense annual increment due to general industry and enterprise, and an extension of State and Municipal control and ownership of such monopolies as can be managed by public bodies in the public interest. Nor did Davitt stop there. With each year his outlook widened, and his convictions strengthened, in favour of still more thorough-going reforms.

Unfortunately, Davitt was not fated to lead a second New Departure. Ireland in those days offered the grimly tragic spectacle of a country divided against itself by the struggles of opposing factions, who were as a rule more anxious to triumph over personal rivals than to exalt great principles. Davitt felt himself bound in honour to the anti-Parnellites, but though he fought steadily for reason and justice, his influence did not avail to eliminate sordid motives and barren prejudices. It might have been different had he felt himself able to give a powerful national lead on new lines, and formulate a programme to supersede the wretched disputes in which the politicians were wasting their energies.

Rightly or wrongly, Davitt did not believe the time was ripe. The country, he felt, had not been sufficiently educated, and in particular his colleagues had not been convinced. Tenaciously as Davitt held to his own point of view, he had a dislike so strong as to amount to a political defect, for insisting on the adoption of schemes to which the majority of those with whom he was acting were opposed. This is where he differed, not always to his advantage or to the advantage of the country, from a man like Parnell, for though modesty is one of the supreme virtues in private life, in politics it has its drawbacks. It was a national loss that Davitt failed to cut loose from the meshes of the outworn controversies in which he found himself involved, and give the authoritative lead for which the new generation was waiting. But if that distinction was reserved for others, Davitt, though doomed to die in the wilderness, had by his labours and sacrifices done much to smooth the way to the promised land. New men might improve on his methods, but in his earnestness and singleness of purpose, and in his whole-souled devotion to the truth, as he saw it, Michael Davitt upheld throughout his chequered career the noblest traditions of Irish patriotism.

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